

# The Acolytes' Progress

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A tranquil mood induced by retirement combined with an innate penchant for the nostalgic is perhaps not the worst springboard for a German pensioner relaxing in New Zealand to cast a glance back at a quarter of a century of *the acolytes' progress* or more precisely, the unfolding of *ACOLIT* since 1977. The story has been told that the newsletter's inauguration dates back to a July weekend in that very year when about a dozen not so young men and one young woman met in Frankfurt to talk about how their mutual interest in Commonwealth Literature might be better promoted in their respective universities. Of course, in those hoary years of budding Commonwealth Literature Studies none of us would have claimed to speak on behalf of our colleagues, many of whom would rarely have received tidings of literary activities pursued by the (erstwhile) colonized subjects of Her Majesty. And we also knew that at most, the British Commonwealth (of Nations) might have raised some scholarly interest in a few German university departments of history or political science, or with one or the other American Studies scholar occasionally turning his attention to Canadian literature and culture. Apparently, neither international associations such as ACLALS nor its European branch EACLALS founded in 1964 and 1971 respectively, nor *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, then in its eleventh year, had impacted much on the solid phalanx of German Anglisten. If taken note of at all in those years, Commonwealth Literature courses would have been pigeon-holed as "Übungen zur Landeskunde," and I do remember that even in the mid-1980s a well-known professor referred to me as "a colleague who had done so much for *Landeskunde*." If at all, Commonwealth Literature was allotted a side stage of Eng.Lit., gracefully reserved for rehearsals in academia by one or the other *Ordinarius* for a lecturer from the Commonwealth, for a *Wissenschaftlicher Assistent* or *Akademischer Rat*. Lest I am accused here of suggesting a conspiracy of benevolent indifference, *ACOLIT* documents such arrangements although fortunately they figure less prominently these days than they did two decades ago.

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Not surprisingly then, my letter of invitation to meet in Frankfurt which had been sent out to a good number of German university departments of English Literature was positively responded to only by two lecturers from New Zealand (Gordon Collier and Nelson Wattie), a few *Wissenschaftliche Assistenten* (Werner Arens, Reinhard Küsgen, Norbert Platz, Dieter Ramm, Ulla Schild) and two at the time quite recently appointed professors (Dieter Riemenschneider and Gerhard Stilz). They were all motivated to teach Commonwealth Literature: Gordon Collier and Nelson Wattie had been exposed to it as “natives,” others as former DAAD lecturers teaching German in a Commonwealth country, or because of their superiors’ occasionally uttered wish that their acolytes should roam in far-flung regions of the world where English was not altogether unknown.

Having introduced ourselves on that particular July weekend and suffering considerably from an unusual heat wave which we battled in true academic fashion by consuming crates of Taunus-springs mineral water, we agreed upon implementing three rather ambitious projects. We wanted to find a publisher who would assist us in bringing out a series of background readers or collections of essays under the overall title “Grundlagen zur Literatur in englischer Sprache.” Besides, we promised each other to work together in arranging further annual meetings and finally, we agreed that we would launch a newsletter from Frankfurt. Our Göttingen colleague Reinhard Küsgen’s suggestion of naming it *ACOLIT* did not require any arguments of persuasion because we instinctively realized that the adopted title conveyed the modesty of our acolytical role as much as it referred precisely – though bashfully-acronymically-bilingually – to our “Arbeitsgemeinschaft/-gruppe für Commonwealth Literatur / Association of Commonwealth Literature.” Of course, and probably because of our mineral-water inspired enthusiasm, we remained realistic enough not to speculate too much as to the prospects of Commonwealth Literature battling within the fortresses of Eng.Lit. pure, let alone did we dream that No. 50 would one day, namely in 2002, embellish the title page of *ACOLIT*.

To say the least, I hope that the newsletter’s midwife and midmen (though unfortunately Ulla Schild is no longer alive, nor is Dieter Ramm) will toast *the acolytes* with pride and satisfaction on the longevity of a publication that has remained young and as dynamic as ever it was. Yet, there is more to it worth celebrating. Since October 1977 the publication of not a single one of its 49 issues was delayed for more than two months and, what is equally astounding (or perplexing, as the case may be): basically, the original format of *ACOLIT* has not changed – and, I believe, for good reasons. Repeated discussions over the years as to whether or not the newsletter should be elevated to the status of a scholarly journal always ended on the agreement that the realistic and functional approach chosen in 1977 should be retained: that is, to offer a forum of information about Germ-

an (and later on, also Austrian) university courses and publications on Commonwealth Literature; further to announce, recommend and report on conferences; and finally, to contain information of general interest, such as of visiting writers and scholars from the Commonwealth or of useful contacts and addresses. In retrospect, this chosen course has proved most sensible because neither during *ACOLIT*'s infancy nor during its adolescent years would we have had the financial backing, the time and the energy to successfully bring out a journal whose uncertain life expectancy would have been further affected by the sibling rivalry from (financially) healthier serials like *Kunapipi*, *Ariel*, *World Literature in English* or *Commonwealth*.

As to its outward appearance - another reason for celebration - *ACOLIT* has been cosmetically beautified repeatedly since the ascetic appearance of No. 1, which was simply modelled after a typed term paper. The sophisticated-looking title page of No. 49 and an equally impressive "Impressum" reflect the technical progress and the enhanced enjoyment in aesthetically pleasing facades *the acolytes* have been flexible enough not to ward off as questionable pursuits of lesser minds. No longer does an anonymous title picture face the reader, while the "Impressum" unequivocally avows *ACOLIT* to be the "Mitteilungsblatt der Gesellschaft für die Neuen Englischsprachigen Literaturen e.V. (GNEL) / Association for the Study of the New Literatures in English (ASNEL)," complete with GNEL/ASNEL logo and ISSN number. An Anglo-Saxon observer might feel called upon to comment that the newsletter of a loose group of Commonwealth Literature *aficionados* has metamorphosed into the truly German, if not Teutonic institution of a "Mitteilungsblatt" of an "eingetragener Verein".

To add a few more remarks on the changing format. More readily available photocopiers (installed after a drawn-out battle between traditionalists and modernists in the Frankfurt Institute of English and American Studies, the production site of *ACOLIT*), cut the newsletter from No. 12 onwards to half its format size, no doubt thereby troubling the eyesight of the aging founding fathers of CoLit Studies, yet saving money for the Institute which "somehow" had funded production expenses and postage over the years (and would continue to do so until GNEL took over financing its own *Mitteilungsblatt*). No.15 ventured into the pictorial world by displaying the amateurish photograph of a group of photographed African sculptures on its title page against a washed-out blue background; and as in many subsequent issues, the growing archive of Commonwealth literature and culture in Frankfurt had served here as a treasure trove for increasingly more professionally reproduced cross-cultural art works. Coloured covers would become a further trademark of *ACOLIT*, identifying the publication year of its two annual issues till No.32, when for post-mysterious reasons a successful call for a more frequent change of rainbow colours caused confusion among subscribers as to the year they were living in. Such straying

from the familiar path appeared the more inexplicable by an obvious predilection for the garb of blue for no less than 10 of the last 35 issues. Finally from No. 22 onwards and because of double page printing, the present slimmed-down format endowed *ACOLIT* with that elegant appearance none of us would ever like to miss.

With due respect to the ever rising sartorial standards of *the acolytes' progress*, *ACOLIT*'s real merit rests in having transcended such aesthetic commodity promises by having remained 'true to type.' Documenting courses on Commonwealth Literature, properly renamed the New Literatures in English, has continued as one of its mainstays, as much as has listing publications and reporting on conferences. While No. 1 mentions eleven courses mainly on Australian, African or Caribbean literature taught in 1977 as well as in 1977/78, a spectacular increase to thirty courses was recorded within a year, sixty-eight in 1985, 130 in 1991/92 and 156 in 1998/99. A growth by 1500 per cent within two decades that was certainly neither matched by the overall growth of Eng.Lit. nor of Linguistics as another developing area during these years. Economists would not even dream of such a growth rate over a period of merely two decades, but then, culture is a different matter.

Especially during the 1980s, Canadian and African literature figured at the top of the list, but from about the early 1990s onwards courses of a comparative nature and those addressing varieties of English, including Pidgins and Creoles, have almost superseded the earlier more traditionally oriented national literature approach. Further noteworthy observations gained from going through the course listings relate to the institutionalised teaching of a compulsory introductory course in 1987/88 on the New Literatures in English in Frankfurt (where NEL can be studied as one of two core areas in the M.A. English course); of NEL courses forming part of the interdisciplinary and comparative *Aufbaustudiengang* in Munich since 1988; and of the first NEL course in the East, at Humboldt-University in Berlin, which made its appearance in No. 28 (1991).

Similarly, *ACOLIT* registers a comparable positive development in research. The general surveys and introductions characteristic of the mid-1970s were gradually replaced by an ever-increasing number of specialized studies with annual publications growing from less than twenty to forty-five within three years from 1977 to 1980, and then into listings covering several pages of the newsletter, as a glance at No. 40 (15 pages) or more recent issues will reveal. Also worthwhile mentioning here is the project of "Grundlagen zur Literatur in englischer Sprache" that resulted in published volumes on India, West and East Africa and Canada in the 1980s. Unfortunately this undertaking of *the acolytes* collapsed because its series editors, Werner Arens, Gerhard Stilz and myself, could not come to terms with the new publishing company that had taken over from the original

publisher. Although an agreement was signed by us to buy back and make available unsold copies, we never received a response from the new well-known publisher. Copies of all three volumes are still patiently sitting in some storing place in Paderborn, available at half price, as I found out when I bought a set, which I resold to a colleague from Singapore (for the same price!) in 1999.

As exhilarating but more exciting than these facts and figures on courses and publications are the numerous conference reports the editor coaxed colleagues into writing, not the least by promising to honour their individual approaches and styles – which he did, of course. Re-reading them, especially the ones published during *ACOLIT*'s infant years, as I have done with much pleasure recently when on holiday from retirement, has unearthed a host of buried details and recalled half-forgotten moods and memories of places, people and incidents. More than one hundred reports authored by over sixty colleagues *and* students (!) paint a vivid and varied picture of the growth of interest in Commonwealth Literature generally and in specific regions or countries like Australia or Canada promoted first by individual colleagues, for instance Horst Prießnitz in Wuppertal or Konrad Gross in Kiel, and later on by associations such as the *Gesellschaft für Kanadastudien* (founded in 1980) or the Australian Studies Association (founded in 1990). I was also reminded that a very lively centre of Caribbean Studies had sprung up at Bremen University but unfortunately did not survive, mainly I believe, because of university politics and Jürgen Martini's departure to Bayreuth University where, from the beginnings of the 1980s, African Studies were promoted by Eckhard Breitingner, Ric Taylor, Martini and Reinhard Sander, and were partly financed by – the Bavarian state government. Bavarian universities, incidentally – or rather, colleagues in Augsburg, Bayreuth, Laufen and Munich – hosted quite a few conferences on Commonwealth Literature / the New Literatures in English.

The 1978 Augsburg get-together organized by Jürgen Schäfer and Dieter Ramm took a step forward in *the acolytes'* joint endeavour of cooperation by focusing on a topic, the genre of the short story, and boasted twenty-one participants from fourteen universities, no doubt due to Schäfer's high reputation among his Eng.Lit. colleagues and his seminal essay on "Was ist englische Literatur? Wissenschaftstheoretische Probleme und curriculare Herausforderung" (1976). In the following year, Jürgen Martini's Bremen conference laid the foundation of the increasingly international character of future "Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies Conferences in German Speaking Countries" with the active participation of the writer Taban lo Liyong from Kenya and the Australian scholar Carole Ferrier.

And so we have moved on annually from one university to another, grateful to our colleagues who organized our meetings, often enough with little or no financial, departmental or university support. Gerhard Stilz's

conference on "Drama in the Commonwealth" resulted in the first book-length publication of papers presented, here in the intimate Tübingen university guesthouse in Bavarian Oberjoch tucked away in dramatic Alpine surroundings. Students participated for the first time in the Kiel conference on poetry in 1982, encouraged by Konrad Gross and Wolfgang Kloos who had established Canadian Studies at this university. Our Bayreuth colleagues organised one of the until then biggest events in 1983 where conference papers and readings by an impressive array of more than a dozen writers from the Caribbean, Africa, Australia, Canada and even far-away Fiji were complemented by a poetry performance and an African drumming session.

These and further annual 'stagings' during the later 1980s in Feldkirchen/Munich, Berlin, Laufen/Salzburg and Königstein/Frankfurt echoed the growing importance of Commonwealth Literature studies in Germany where an increasing number of English departments had now made their appearance on the pages of *ACOLIT*. The time had arrived, some *acolytes* felt, to reflect on their future role – tentatively at first and by no means speaking in one voice, since many of us were quite happy to continue pursuing our slightly subversive activities at our home universities, taking courage from growing student interest and sustained liberal indifference of disinterested colleagues. Within a few years, however, scepticism as to the rationality of organizing ourselves more effectively by founding a German *Verein* with its supposedly innate features of power-broking gave way to the drawing up of statutes of an association which eventually and in a most democratic manner led to the founding of GNEL/ASNEL at the Gießen conference in 1989. Understandably perhaps, *ACOLIT* is silent about details of the by no means smooth process of setting up our association, with Peter Stummer confining his comments on the Gießen conference in the 'blue' No. 25 to its academic and cultural activities. Readers of this issue who had not attended were matter-of-factly informed about the newly founded "Gesellschaft für die Neuen Englischsprachigen Literaturen" on its last page. From No. 33 onwards *ACOLIT* would regularly contain "Mitteilungen des Vorstands" with No. 43 finally being transformed from a mere newsletter into its present version of *Mitteilungsblatt*.

Personally, I am not now sure whether this noticeable shift towards bone-dry *Mitteilungen* informs and entertains readers as much as earlier issues have done. To produce such healthily balanced issues, perhaps more attention should again be paid to a number of features that had been introduced earlier but had not been followed up throughout, while new ideas of further augmenting the quality of *ACOLIT* should be developed. I remember the inclusion of synopses of M.A. and PhD.-theses, which as far back as in No. 4 had filled one or the other *ACOLIT* page, but in later issues may unfortunately have given the impression that it was mainly the editor's

university where such work was being produced. Further, bibliographies of important publications, creative as well as critical, can be found in No.11 to No.19 and at the time served as first-hand information of various 'national' literatures and linguistics, selected by German specialists and intended for German students. Although journals like *Australian Literary Studies* or *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* offer near-comprehensive annual surveys, guided and select bibliographies might be of more use to students and new arrivants on the scene. A final feature, which similarly had helped students and younger academics to familiarize themselves with the NEL scene, was the presentation of NEL activities at one or the other German university as presented in No. 27 to No. 32. Now, almost ten years later, such surveys would not just attract notice to the state of the art but also offer insight into changes and developments that have since taken place in Frankfurt or Bayreuth, Munich and Aachen, or Hanover and Trier, which featured in these earlier issues.

As *ACOLIT*'s editor for many years I would like to thank my colleagues for their support and frequent contributions: conference reports and surveys typed out by a succession of secretaries of the IEAS on their rather old-fashioned machines during those cumbersome BC (before Computer) years. And, I would also like to thank a long line of young *Wissenschaftliche Hilfskräfte* and *Mitarbeiter*, those irreplaceable mainstays of German universities - of whom I must mention Martina Raßmann and Monika Trebert, Marlies Glaser-Tucker and Andrea Sperl, Markus Wegner and Katja Sarkowsky, but most of all Frank Schulze-Engler. They assisted with the collection of material, the preparation of the manuscript, with proof-reading and co-editing and invested their aesthetic imagination into the layout of *ACOLIT*, thereby nurturing it through its adolescence. In its twenty-sixth year in 2002, with its intellectual and financial future secured by more than 250 international members of GNEL, *the acolytes' ACOLIT* can now look forward to an actively mature middle age - with no thought of retirement.